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Gender in the Bamako Polycentric World Social Forum (2006): Is Another World Possible?

By Aurelie Latoures¹

Abstract:

This paper² explores a gender analysis of the Bamako Polycentric World Social Forum, 2006. Thus far, gender has been marginalized in the World Social Forum process, despite the progressive tone of the project for “another world”, indirectly alluding to gender equality. The Bamako WSF 2006 is an interesting case study to assess gender institutionalisation, as for the first time African women activists were massively integrated into the discussions. Additionally, national organizers dedicated a specific venue for gender issues, the Women’s World. What was the impact of these two features for the “engendering” of the WSF?

Keywords: gender, social movements, Africa, anti-globalization

Introduction:

The World Social Forum (WSF) has been organized every year since 2001. It offers a global space for critical social movements and aims at “building a new world of solidarity” (WSF Charter of Principles 2001). It has created a considerable amount of enthusiasm amongst the women’s movements. Indeed, the WSF Charter of Principles³ stresses the destructive effects of corporate-driven globalization, among which sexist dimensions are enhanced (article 11). It also “condemns all forms of domination and all subjection of one person by another” (article 10), while promoting a participative form of democracy within the WSF, undertaking decisions “without directing, hierarchizing, censoring or restricting them” (article 7). The WSF appears to be a counter hegemonic space where social justice is a goal and power relations are more fluid.

Hence, the women’s movements seized this new opportunity to advocate for gender equality.⁴ From the beginning, feminists, women’s rights activists, and gender advocates have been pro-active in the WSF’s process. Participation in the WSF potentially offers them additional organizational and discursive capacities in two ways.

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² The author would like to thank reviewers from the JIWS, as well as Claudy Vouhé and Sandrina Granja for their careful re-readings and suggestions on draft versions of this paper.

³ The Charter was drafted in Brazil, at the end of the first WSF, in Porto Alegre in 2001. It was approved and adopted by the organizations that make up the World Social Forum Organizing Committee, and later by the WSF International Council, the same year. It has achieved a quasi-constitutional status within the WSF process, as it helps to guide and define orientations for future editions of the WSF.

⁴ Gender equality is considered (here) as the principled ideas which bound the women’s movements together. It denotes women having the same opportunities as men in all aspects of life, including in the public sphere.

Firstly, transnational networking had been captured by United Nations conferences on women and other institutional events (Falquet 2003): the WSF renews and widens networking possibilities. Secondly, by reframing their concerns in the wake of anti-globalization struggles, the women's movements may benefit from new (or at least renewed) arguments for gender advocacy.

Since the second half of the 1990s, women's movements have reassessed their strategies; they had been involved in the different UN conferences (Vienna in 1993, Cairo in 1994, Beijing in 1995) and their follow-up meetings (Beijing +5 in 2000, for instance), where they succeeded in introducing gender equality into the international agenda. Yet, these efforts yielded meagre concrete results and new analyses emerged linking the persistence of gender imbalance with the global neoliberal regime:

Any possibility for more significant changes in the rights and life conditions of most women were in effect blocked by the intensification of neoliberal globalisation, the ever more dramatic rolling back of the State, structural adjustment processes, and the concomitant erosion of citizenship and social policies (Alvarez, Faria and Nobre 2003: 200).

As the WSF is the most enduring expression of the anti-globalisation movement, it raised important hopes within the women's movements.

Yet, the WSF has not fulfilled all its promises. Since the beginning, criticisms have emerged concerning both the marginalization of women as participants (especially in the panels dominated by men) and of gender as an issue. For instance, the World March of Women, a major transnational feminist network, wrote a declaration at the end of the Porto Alegre 2003 WSF which stated:

We nevertheless saw that women's presence remains marginal and is only "politely tolerated". We are still a long way from achieving genuine dialogue on the role of women and feminism in the construction of another world (World March of Women 2003: 234).

Gender analyses⁵ of the World Social Forum are actually very rare and mostly the product of feminist networks rather than of mainstream WSF literature.⁶ The first explanation for this could be that the WSF is still a new phenomenon in general, and knowledge of it is still incomplete. But, the very nature of the forum also makes it difficult to analyse. It is not an organisation, but rather a physical and temporal space for (very) different movements to meet, often described as a "movement of movements". This important feature is also a key element for the legitimacy of the WSF, presented as a neutral space, without power relations within (Teivainen 2004). Yet, feminists' criticisms

⁵ Defined as a "systematic gathering and examination on information on gender differences and social relations in order to identify and redress inequities based on gender" (Reeves and Balden, 2000: 2).

⁶ Major international feminist networks have denounced the marginalization of gender within the WSF (AWID, WIDE, The Penelopes, Articulacion Feminista Mercosur, etc...). They have been particularly vocal since 2003. See for instance: Karadenizli, Allaert and De La Cruz 2003; Salazar 2004; Bjork 2004; Duddy 2004.

tend to put a question mark against this supposed depoliticization. Power relations do exist within the WSF. Saying that does not necessarily mean that there is a conscious attempt by some organizations to silently rule the process. However, it does reveal that relations of power are not made sufficiently transparent, thus (among other problems) making gender imbalance invisible and therefore not addressed.

So far, the WSF has been a rather gender-blind process. Gender equality appears, at best, as a *discursive* priority, i.e. not operationalized within the WSF. Despite the fact that the WSF targets social change, it has failed to integrate gender equality as a goal and gender mainstreaming⁷ as a strategy. Firstly, the process in itself does not reflect dynamic gender relations. Manifestations of gender inequality can be observed for instance in terms of participation in the WSF: men and women have not participated equally in the organizational structuring or in the different discussions dominated by male experts. Secondly, gender issues are not mainstreamed in all major themes of the forum, but are marginalized as “women’s issues”. Some slight improvements can be witnessed, but further efforts require a shift in organisational cultures and ways of thinking, as well as in the goals, structures and resource allocations of institutions (Kardam 1997). In brief, the WSF is both an opportunity as well as a challenge for the women’s movement. It allows the inclusion of gender equality struggle in the making of a new world, but at the same time the WSF itself has to be “engendered”, i.e. making gender institutionalisation a reality within the process.

Bearing this context in mind, this paper proposes a gender analysis of the Polycentric WSF held in Bamako (Mali) in January 2006. How has gender been addressed in this forum? Does it reveal the same weaknesses as before? Has the WSF learnt from criticisms of its gender-blindness? Apart from these “classic” questions, the Bamako 2006 WSF is of specific interest concerning gender institutionalisation for two main reasons. Firstly, African women participated massively in this forum. This is an important new feature as the women’s movement had been represented at past WSFs mainly by Latin American or western women. Secondly, specific venue was for the first time dedicated to women: the Women’s World (*Univers des Femmes*). How have these two features effected the assessment of gender institutionalisation in the Bamako WSF 2006?

In 2006, the WSF moved from its traditional site in Porto Alegre and was decentralized to three locations: Asia (Karachi, Pakistan), Latin America (Caracas, Venezuela), and Africa (Bamako, Mali). The organizers wanted to promote a truly world-wide dimension to the forum. Indeed Latin Americans and Europeans had tended to dominate the scene, as many other participants (especially from the global South) could not afford to reach Brazil. With the increasing number of national, local, and regional forums, there was also an increasing demand for Africa and Asia to be articulated into the global process. In 2004, a first symbolic opening to the world was made when the WSF was located in Mumbai, India. The internationalization of the WSF continued with the polycentric forums in 2006. The idea was to give a voice to new participants from the South and to include some new perspectives into the movement. But in 2006, the real

⁷ Gender mainstreaming may be defined as: “an organisational strategy to bring a gender perspective to all aspects of an institution’s policy and activities, through building gender capacity and accountability” (Reeves and Balden 2000: 14).

challenge was the Bamako WSF. It marked a major turning point as African civil society had previously been marginalized in the process. Additionally, this event was also seen as a test to assess the capacity for mobilization and organization on the continent, as plans were being laid to organize the next centralized WSF in Africa in 2007 (Nairobi).

The afro-centric dimension of the Forum created challenges for mainstreaming gender into the WSF. Indeed, gender concerns in the WSFs had been captured by European and, above all, Latin American women activists, who had been very pro-active. African women had been doubly-marginalized: firstly as Africans, and secondly as women. Very few African women's organizations had attended earlier WSFs (Salazar 2004).

The first issue to raise concerning gender mainstreaming at the WSF is, therefore, the incorporation of African women as participants and potential alternative agenda-setters. What could be the impact of their participation for the women's movements and for the WSF? Could this forum help African women activists to be included in global debates? How could this forum help them network with transnational women's organizations and shape new strategies that would include their own experiences? How could it contribute to set new questions on the global agenda?

The second important issue is how the Bamako WSF dealt with its organizational choices. Different themes were identified and self-organized activities were located accordingly in various venues in the city of Bamako. National organizers, under pressure from Malian women's organizations, decided to dedicate an entire platform for the fourth theme, the "alliance between patriarchy and neoliberalism and marginalization of women's struggles".⁸ This platform came to occupy the space referred to as the *Univers des Femmes*. What has been the impact of these organizational decisions in terms of gender participation and visibility? How has it resulted (or not) into a gender-aware agenda? Is it a sign of marginalization of women or rather a way to correct it?

This paper proposes to assess gender institutionalisation within the WSF process, by studying the impact of these two features of the Bamako Polycentric WSF: African women's participation in section 1, and the Women's World as a specific venue in section 2.

African Women's Incorporation into the WSF Process: New Challenges

The Bamako WSF provided a space for African civil society to participate in the anti-globalization movement.⁹ But how have African women's organizations been included in this process and what is the impact, both for the women's movements and for gender institutionalisation within the WSF?

African women activists' experiences in the African anti-globalization movement

The Bamako WSF 2006 is not the starting point for African participation in the anti-globalization movement. Since the late 1990s, African civil society has been quite

⁸ Themes are detailed on the official website for the Bamako WSF 2006: <http://www.fsmmali.org>

⁹ Or global justice and solidarity movement ("*altermondialisme*," in French). This is a social movement opposed to neoliberal globalization and which stands for another form of globalization respectful of human rights, national sovereignty, environment, and cultural diversity. It is "opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and [is] committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among humankind and between it and the Earth" in: *WSF Charter of Principles*, 2001, article 1.

active in this social movement, but mostly on a regional level, which made it globally invisible. In 2002, a year after the first WSF in Porto Alegre, Bamako hosted the first African Social Forum (ASF). The slogan was: "Another Africa is possible." More than 200 organizations participated. The ASF has been organized every year since. The ASFs have helped structure local, national, and regional African social movements. For instance, many local and national forums have been organized in the ensuing years (in Mali, South Africa, etc.), and local leaders have emerged, such as Aminata Dramane Traoré.¹⁰ The ASF has also contributed to strengthening the voice and credibility of African social movement on the international scene. Consequently, it enabled them to bid and obtain the hosting of the WSF in Africa for 2007.

In the first ASF, in Bamako in 2002, women were identified (together with children) as the main victims of neoliberalism, and this realization was included in the final document, the *Bamako Declaration Statement* of January 2002. Yet, women's organizations were neither presented, nor represented in the forum. Out of the broad thematic areas none dealt with gender or even women's issues (Beleoken, 2002). In the ensuing forums, women's organizations participated more fully, but they have generally been marginalized as organizations, and debates have been largely captured by men. In the 2003 ASF, women lobbied until a draft resolution on gender representation ratio (50:50), both in the processes and in the activities, was discussed. But, in the last ASF (in Conakry 2005), gender was still not part of the thematic areas.

Yet, as "women were not given sufficient space to participate and raise feminist issues throughout the conferences" (Alexander and Mbali 2004), they created their own spaces for discussions. The African Court of Women was initiated at the Luzaka ASF 2004, and was repeated in 2005 together with the Feminist Dialogues. The participatory form of these gatherings contrasted with the general patriarchal formalities of the ASF's, often referred to as the "authoritative social forum" (quoted by Alexander 2005). Even if a limited number of African women activists (and among them a majority of Anglophones) did participate in these events, they have been depicted as a major tool for African women's movements. Those two instruments for increasing women's participation were also mobilized in the Bamako WSF. This reveals a certain degree of continuity between the ASF's and the WSF held in Bamako. The Bamako WSF has not come out of a vacuum. African women's organizations have learnt from their participation in regional forums.

Whilst their marginalization is indeed a consequence of a male-dominated process, it also derives from the fact that women's organizations in Africa (generally) do not feel close to anti-liberal discourses (Beleoken 2002). Indeed, one of the major weaknesses of the anti- globalization social movement in Africa is that it is not a popular one and this perception also affects women.

But, how did African women's organizations get involved in the Bamako Forum? Did they participate more actively? Why? How? Who did not participate?

African women's participation in the Bamako WSF 2006

¹⁰ Aminata Dramane Traoré is the former Minister for Culture in Mali. She has been quite active since the beginning in the anti-globalization process. With her organization, Amadou Hampate Ba, she was the initiator of the first African Social Forum in 2002. She is now the most emblematic figure of the African social movement, even though sometimes criticized in Mali where the social movement is divided around her.

In terms of participation, even though the forum's goal of 30.000 participants was not met, the Bamako WSF was a clear success. During the final press conference, organizers stated that no less than 20,000 people had participated in the forum, amongst which, 10.000 were from Mali and the others from more than 113 other countries. An important proportion of those participants were actually women. "Women's mobilization: they have come and they are all here!" was the title of the Panos Infos opening the session (Diarra, 2006). More than 1,500 women were present at the Women's World (Gbadamassi 2006). Among them, Malian women were the majority, and they also registered in great numbers as individuals (Diarra, 2006). The National WSF Council provided transportation so that hundreds of rural women could come and participate in the discussions in Bamako. Women's participation was extensively covered in the media¹¹ as an important and key feature of the Bamako WSF. It is important to note that women were also involved in the decision-making process from the initial stages of the organizational process. In fact, the National WSF Council, which was responsible for the organization of the Bamako WSF 2006, was made up of hundreds of Malian NGOs. Major Malian women's organizations were present in at least one of the 11 commissions of the Council.¹² The important representation of women's organizations and the fact that the leader of the forum's oversight organization was a woman (Aminata Dramane Traoré) could probably have generated further opportunities for gender mainstreaming.

Yet, some observations moderate this optimistic stance. For one, women's participation, as massive as it might be, was not representative in terms of generation. Indeed, most of the women involved, both in the organizing and in the audience, were older women. Young women were significantly absent. The fact that young women activists were not given a voice was highlighted on the first day of the forum, within the Feminist Dialogues, one of the most popular sessions¹³ in the Women's World. Roselyn Musa, Advocacy Officer of the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) and co-organizer of the Feminist Dialogues, also raises this issue:

Young women feel that older feminists are monopolizing the scene, and although some of the older women rationalized this situation, it was clear that young women need to be more fully incorporated into the movement. One area that young women should be encouraged is by enhancing their leadership capacities through internships that empower them to make good choices for themselves (R. Musa interviewed by Kinoti 2006).

Yet, even if young women participate in internships, they are not given a chance to have a leadership position afterwards, and they do not stay in the organizations, as one young Malian woman claimed. She had been doing an internship in the Malian women's

¹¹ See for instance: Gbadamassi 2006; Larqué and Lusson 2006; Diarra 2006; and TerraViva (the independent newspaper of the Polycentric World Social Forum, in Bamako, hosted by IPS) and especially its third issue with a front page on women in the Bamako Forum.

¹² Out of the 11 commissions, none was dedicated to gender. Yet issues concerning the Women's World were discussed within the Thematic Areas commission.

¹³ The Feminist Dialogues was one of the most popular events within the Women's World in terms of participation, with more than 350 women attending (Kinoti 2006).

umbrella organization CAFO when she became aware of this generation gap. She decided to create her own organization to empower young women,¹⁴ and she was therefore able to be part of the organization of the social forum.

Another reservation was that women's participation had been captured by few women's organizations, which had been quite active from the initial stages of the Bamako Social Forum organizing, and represented by charismatic individuals.

The integration of African women's movements into the WSF is an important innovation, as they were invisible before. Yet, their participation has also challenged the women's movements by including divergent concepts and concerns.

African women's movement and international connections: a gap not addressed

The building of a transnational women's movement has always been made difficult because of tensions between western and African women's organizations (among other things). The UN-sponsored International Women's Conference in Copenhagen in 1980 epitomised this conflict. In this conference, debates arose around questions of sexuality, on the Female Genital Mutilation controversy for instance (Hosken 1983), and questions of economics (is patriarchy or liberalism the most damaging for women?). The struggle over the word "feminism" sums up well some of the issues at stake. African women's organizations prefer to be labelled as part of the "women's movements" rather than as feminists (Sow 2001). Women's movements in Africa have a very different history from their western counterparts. The African movements emerged along with anti-colonial and nationalist movements. In the international conferences organized during the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985), African women shed light on specific issues (such as development and poverty issues) while expressing their differences from [western] feminists. The creation of AFARD in Senegal, as the first independent organization for research on women in Africa in 1977, is a good example of that vision. Later, many African researchers (such as O. Oyewumi, S. Kandji, and F. K. Camara or Assié-Lumumba) demonstrated that gender and feminism are not appropriate for Africa (Sow 2001). But this resistance reflects a will to distance themselves from western ideologies rather than from women's struggles in general.

In the 1990s, the women's movement was renewed through the anti-globalization framing. The Bamako WSF, and its massive participation from African women's organizations, appears to be a new step, and a new opportunity, for the internationalisation of the women's movement. Indeed the Bamako WSF 2006 was also meant to integrate the African women's movements into the global process, but this integration is problematic as issues, contexts, and concepts are not necessarily shared.

For the first time, the WSF has witnessed the connections between western women's movements and African ones. Yet, the difficult question of the link between feminists and the African women's movements has been poorly addressed in the forum, in part, because debates in Bamako were more practical than theoretical. African women's key concerns related to corporate-driven globalization were highlighted in the Women's Court. Different sessions also focused on violence against women and children, and the issue of Female Genital Mutilation was constantly raised. But very few activities dealt with the women's movement in itself. One session was about the impact of

¹⁴ Interview with A. Cisse, President of the organization *Espoir Jeunes Femmes*, 1st February 2006, Bamako, Mali.

patriarchy on the African women's movements, but less than ten people participated in it. The most important site for such discussion was the Feminist Dialogues. These addressed global issues affecting women and also the meaning of feminism in an African context. One Malian woman opened the debate by demanding clarification on the very meaning of feminism(s) and gender equality "in our countries". Fatou Sow, a famous Senegalese activist and scholar, answered: "It is true that feminism and gender are western concepts. Yet it is necessary to look for appropriate terms in our own languages, to find out the right word that could help mobilize women".¹⁵ Thus, a Malian activist suggested the word "*musoya*" (literally "femininity") in Bambara. But the conclusion from FEMNET panellists was that: "If women refuse to be feminists, they would be left behind." The issue of the definition of feminism is no longer the priority. "It is more important that women find their own ways to defend material and moral interests, rather than agree on a concept".¹⁶

The Bamako WSF was at least a first symbolic step towards the integration of African women's movements into the WSF. They could express and discuss their differences so as to enrich the global women's movements. The next step would be at the Nairobi WSF 2007. Dialogues should be more fruitful, as women's organizations will come from every part of the world to one centralized location, whereas in Bamako, only few non-African women activists were mobilized.

The Bamako WSF 2006 was also innovative in creating, for the first time in an African context, a specific venue for women: the Women's World. What is the impact of this for gender institutionalisation?

The "Women's World" and Gender Mainstreaming

The WSF is a framework for discussing the visions, values, and institutions of an alternative world order. The social justice project is still in the making, but it is interesting to identify the main issues discussed in the forum in order to assess to what extent gender inequalities, as theoretically part of the fight against social inequalities at large, are actually being addressed. The creation of a specific platform for women, the Women's World, in Bamako, might be a way to enhance gender issues, otherwise marginalized. Yet, this capacity depends on the very nature of the venue, and the way gender has been integrated into the whole process.

A gender analysis of the WSF's program of activities

One indicator of gender mainstreaming in the WSF is the proportion of gender issues (directly or indirectly) addressed within the overall program. The program of the Bamako WSF comprised two types of activities: few centrally-organized events (roundtables) on key issues and a range of very diverse self-organized activities, which are supposed to be the heart of the forum. In all there were thirteen centrally-organized thematic roundtables and conferences. These focused on major concerns for Africa and globalization, such as agriculture, migration, and cooperation. Organized by the National WSF Council, these followed a traditional format and featured important international personalities (J. Bové, D. Mitterand, S. Amin, I. Ramonnet, S. George) as panellists. Among these debates, gender was not made an explicit issue at stake.

¹⁵ Author's notes taken while attending the WSF in Bamako.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

When gender issues were discussed, it was mainly amongst the other 492 scheduled self-organized activities. Out of the ten thematic areas identified by the International WSF Council for 2006, the National WSF Council in Bamako decided to focus on thirteen different issue areas, presented as afrocentric issues. For instance, “migration” and “youth” were added, “culture and communication” were dissociated, and “world order” disappeared, but “cooperation” was introduced. Another major change was the reformulation of the fourth international theme: “alliance between patriarchy and neoliberalism and marginalization of women’s struggles”. This was transformed into the “Women’s World” in the Bamako WSF’s program. This new formulation seemed to be far more consensual, or at least less controversial. For each issue area, a different location was chosen for the debates. The Women’s World was located in the Palace of Culture.

Were gender issues only discussed in the Women’s World? A quick study of the contents of the self-organized activities presented in the program reveals that gender sensitive issues represent 13 % of the total of activities scheduled, as shown in Table 1.¹⁷

¹⁷Gender sensitive issues either directly deal with gender concerns, or explicitly use a “gender lens” in understanding their own issue area (for instance, within the agrarian issue area, women’s access to land was specifically discussed, and within the social struggles issue area, ATTAC organized a conference on the women’s workers movement in Burkina Faso against the company Yves Rocher). The specific gender contents of the issues will be discussed in detail later in the paper.

Table 1: *Proportion of gender sensitive issues out of the total of scheduled self-organized activities in the Bamako WSF*¹⁸

| Number of activities Thematic areas for self organized activities | Total number of scheduled activities | Number of gender sensitive issues | Proportion of gender sensitive issues in each thematic area | Proportion of gender sensitive issues out of the total of gender issues | Proportion of gender sensitive issues on the overall activities |
|--|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|
| 1. Peace and war | 23 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2. Global liberalism | 16 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 3. Migration | 18 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 4. Peasants and agrarian issue | 34 | 2 | 6.25 | 307 | 041 |
| 5. Women's world | 55 | 55 | 100 | 84.61 | 11.18 |
| 6. Communication | 17 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 7. Culture | 24 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 8. Ecosystem 's destruction | 33 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 9. Cooperation | 21 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 10. Debt, IMF and WTO | 34 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 11. Social struggles | 116 | 4 | 3.44 | 6. 15 | 0.82 |
| 12. Alternatives | 39 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 13. Youth camp | 62 | 4 | 6. 45 | 6.15 | 0.82 |
| TOTAL: | 492 | 65 | / | 100 | 13.23 |

Table 1 clearly shows that gender sensitive issues were concentrated in one thematic area: the Women's World. This thematic area represented more than 80% of the gender issues discussed at the forum. Gender was therefore weakly mainstreamed throughout the Bamako WSF. It is worth noting, however, that organizations did register their activities without choosing the thematic area in which they would appear. This classification was made afterwards by the organizers. This selection process is far from neutral. It is not the same thing if the debate on "women's access to land" is included in the Peasant and Agrarian issues' venue or in the Women's World. The participants and the audience would not be the same, and consequently the very framing of the issue is important. The fact that the majority of gender issues were addressed within the Women's World prevented them from being integrated into other major discussions of the forum. Relegated as distinct issues, they were eventually only discussed among women, who represented the majority of the participants and audience for the Women's World.

¹⁸ Table 1 was developed by the author with data provided by the detailed program of activities of the Bamako Polycentric WSF 2006 (available at: <http://www.fsmmali.org>). The 492 scheduled activities were divided by the organizers into 13 thematic areas (left column). The table disaggregates these activities according to their gender sensitive contents (up side column).

Yet, gender issues were also debated in two other thematic areas: Social Struggles and Youth. It is not surprising, as gender issues are generally associated with social issues. On the contrary, a genuine gender mainstreaming would have resulted in the integration of a gender lens into other major thematic areas such as the one dealing with the World Bank, or with diplomatic relations (migration) for instance. However, Social Struggles and Youth were the two most productive thematic areas of the forum: they represented respectively 23.4% and 13% of the total scheduled activities, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: *Relative importance of each thematic area*¹⁹

| Number of activities | Number of scheduled activities | Proportion of activities by thematic area out of the total number of activities |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Self organized activities | | |
| 1. Peace and war | 23 | 4.6% |
| 2. Global liberalism | 16 | 3.2% |
| 3. Migration | 18 | 3.5% |
| 4. Peasants and agrarian issue | 34 | 6.8% |
| 5. Women's world | 55 | 11.2 % |
| 6. Communication | 17 | 3.4% |
| 7. Culture | 24 | 4.9% |
| 8. Ecosystem's destruction | 33 | 6.7% |
| 9. Cooperation | 21 | 4.3% |
| 10. Debt, IMF and WTO | 34 | 7% |
| 11. Social struggles | 116 | 23.4% |
| 12. Alternatives | 39 | 8% |
| 13. Youth camp | 62 | 13% |
| TOTAL: | 492 | 100% |

Being integrated into those two prominent thematic areas certainly reinforced the visibility of gender issues within the forum. Table 2 also reveals that the Women's World was a very dynamic thematic area. With 11.2% of the total of activities in the forum, it is the third thematic area in terms of the density of activities (after Social Struggles and Youth). In previous WSFs, gender issues were not given a specific venue. Of course, this does not mean that they were absent from the debate. The women's movements managed to create their own strategic spaces in each social forum, such as, for instance, the

¹⁹ Table 2 was developed by the author from data provided by the detailed program of activities of the Bamako Polycentric World Social Forum, 2006 (Available at: <http://www.fsmmali.org>). For each of the 13 thematic areas, I counted the number of activities scheduled and compared it with the overall number of activities scheduled (492).

Feminist Dialogues, organized in Mumbai 2004 and renewed in Porto Alegre 2005, or the Diversity Boat in Porto Alegre WSF 2005.²⁰ Yet, the Women's World represents a major African innovation, as for the first time such a platform has been institutionalized. This was an initiative from the national WSF Organizing Committee. Many women's organizations were represented in this committee. The major consequence of this was that gender issues were made more visible, for instance, in the program itself.

This initiative was the result of a successful lobbying from some Malian gender activists who managed to have a voice in the decision making process. Among them, charismatic women leaders, such as Barry Aminata Touré²¹ and Traoré Oumou Touré,²² appeared to be very influential in this decision. But this was also an opportunity for the National Organizing Committee to present the 2006 WSF as a participative forum. In a speech made prior to the opening of the event, Mamadou Goita (coordinator of the Organizing Committee) put a great emphasis on the Women's World, depicted as a major innovative strategy "to go beyond testimonies and to allow thorough discussions" (quoted by Ilboudo 2006).²³

In this perspective, the Women's World is a *partial* form of recognition of previous gender imbalances in the activities of the social forums. On the one hand, a specific venue is for the first time dedicated to women's issues. Barry Aminata Touré highlighted the fact that this space was a tribune for women (in general), who had had no voices in the past WSFs. "Including women in the social movement is a major challenge, but we can take it up" (L'humanité 2006), she asserted in an interview given during the WSF. Yet, it was also more specifically a "window created to pay tribute to *African women*" (Touré quoted by Kone 2006). But on the other hand, this initiative is still a *partial* recognition, as its very creation was contingent on specific agents (i.e. renown Malian gender activists) and circumstances (i.e. the Women's World as a symbolic resource for the 2006 WSF).²⁴

However, in the two other polycentric forums, in Caracas (Venezuela) and Karachi (Pakistan), such an institutionalisation had not been initiated. For instance, in Karachi, there were 9 different thematic areas and one dealt with "women, patriarchy, and social change". This theme represented 7.5% of all the confirmed self-organized

²⁰ Such initiatives were also duplicated in the different social fora organized at regional and/or local levels. In the European Social Forum, the Women's Day (since 2003) and the Women's Web in the Boston Social Forum (2004) both illustrate the diverse strategies implemented by the women's movement in order to be visible.

²¹ She is the president of CAD-Mali (Debt and Development Coalition), which is an umbrella organization coordinating a great part of the anti-globalization movement in Mali. She was the vice-president of the Resource Mobilization commission in the WSF 2006 Organizing Committee.

²² She is the president of CAFO (Coordinated Women's Associations and NGOs in Mali), which is a very powerful umbrella organization, made up of hundred of women's organizations nationwide. Several members of the CAFO were represented in different commissions of the WSF 2006 Organizing Committee.

²³ Yet, the creation and the emphasis put on the Women's World by the Organizing Committee in 2006 is not necessarily a sign of gender institutionalisation, as this initiative was also instrumentalized by the Malian committee as a "show case" for a renewed participative forum. Secondly, it was supported by Malian women's organizations, which makes it unlikely to be renewed in 2007 for instance.

²⁴ This initiative is therefore unlikely to be renewed in the 2007 Nairobi WSF as such strategic resources would not be available.

activities,²⁵ as compared to 13% in Mali. In Caracas, the situation was different: only 6 thematic areas were identified by the Organizing Committee. None of them dealt specifically with gender. The result was that gender issues were submerged into the whole program.²⁶ Therefore, creating a women-specific platform in Mali appears to have increased the number and visibility of gender activities, although they were weakly incorporated within the forum. But, this assertion needs to be completed with a discussion on the contents of the activities organized within the Women's World.

A gender analysis of the Women's World

In order to better understand partial gender mainstreaming in the Bamako WSF, it is necessary to study the gender contents of the Women's World. Table 3 shows the diversity of the issues dealt with in the platform. If gender issues have been weakly or partially mainstreamed in the WSF, the Women's World, on the contrary, mainstreamed most of the major issues developed in other thematic areas.

Table 3: *Gender issues in the Women's World*²⁷

| Gender issues | Number of occurrences |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Women's human rights | 12 |
| Violence against women and children | 4 |
| Women's movement | 4 |
| South/North relations | 3 |
| Peace and war | 3 |
| Woman leadership | 3 |
| Economic justice | 3 |
| Entrepreneurship | 2 |
| Land ownership | 2 |
| Poverty | 2 |
| Trade | 2 |
| Macro economy | 1 |
| ICTs | 1 |
| Patriarchy/feminism | 1 |

The major focus of the Women's World was on women's human rights. More precisely, events dealt mainly with sexual and reproductive rights, HIV AIDS, and prostitution as major concerns, as well as the protection of women's rights in general.

²⁵ 358 self-organized activities were scheduled in Karachi WSF 2006. Among them, 27 activities were registered in the theme "I" (women, patriarchy, and social change), which represent 7.5% of the total of activities. The program of activities is available on the web site: <http://www.wsf2006karachi.org>.

²⁶ See the thematic areas and the program on the web site: <http://www.forosocialmundial.org.ve>.

²⁷ Table 3 was developed by the author from data concerning Women's World included in the detailed Program of activities of the Bamako Polycentric World Social Forum, 2006 (Available at: <http://www.fsmmali.org>). Out of the 55 activities scheduled in the Women's World, I identified 14 major issues discussed. The table aims to show the relative importance of each issue within the venue. Note that one single activity may be linked to several gender related issues, so that the total of occurrences does not make 55.

Economic issues were the second major focus. Economic justice, trade, entrepreneurship, poverty, and macro-economics together made a subtotal of 10 occurrences. The North/South divide, a crucial question in the context of an afrocentric WSF, was partially addressed. Yet, theoretical questions on feminism and African women's movements were absent from the program, except for the Feminist Dialogues. Most of the issues were actually women's issues rather than gender issues. The relational dimensions of the social construction of gender roles and relations are quite invisible in the debates, as well as issues of masculinities.

Out of the 55 activities scheduled, many were cancelled (although cancellations did not appear to be limited to the Women's World). Among the events that actually took place, many were small activities with a limited audience. But four events were of significance: the World March of Women, the Feminist Dialogues, the Women's Court, and a workshop on international funding for grassroots women.

The World March of Women (WMW) was an important event in this forum, gathering more than 100 participants from Europe, Africa, and Latin America. The WMW is a feminist global action network, created in 1995, after the Beijing Conference, by women activists in Québec. It aims at linking the struggles against the domination of economic neoliberal system and the domination of patriarchy. The WMW organized a march in 2000, and again in 2005 where it was hosted by 76 countries worldwide. The WSF offers the movement a space for the different national WMW's coordinating committees to meet physically and strategize for the future. The WMW is a clear example of a successful integration of anti-globalization issues into the feminist movements.

The Feminist Dialogues (FD) was the most popular event of the Women's World, with more than 350 participants, women-only. The first FD was organized in Mumbai WSF 2004, at the initiative of Asian women's movements (and especially Isis International Manila and National Network of Autonomous Women's Groups, India) and was replicated in Porto Alegre WSF in 2005. Its coordinating group is made up of several organizations (whose number is growing, reaching 12 in 2006), among which FEMNET is a pioneer member representing Africa. FEMNET organized the FD 2006 in Bamako. The participation of African women's movements in the FD was a new opportunity to (re) strategize feminist visions. Yet as the majority of participants were actually from Africa, the "dialogue" could not be complete.²⁸

The Women's Court was organized by Enda TM (Senegal), a renown African organization involved in the WSF process since its beginning. It gave voice to many African women who came to give testimony about the impact of the neoliberal system on their everyday lives. Like the FD, the Women's Court is now one of the major feminist events in the WSFs, widely covered by the media.

The workshop organized by three U.S.-based foundations (the Global Fund for Women, New Field Foundation, and the African Development Fund), was paradoxically one of the most popular events related to a specific issue of interests for African women. The idea was to create networks between women's organizations at the grassroots and these foundations which finance women's projects. First, the donors presented their

²⁸ Indeed the Bamako FD was not considered a formal one, but at best as a rehearsal or trial run before Nairobi WSF 2007. The FD's website does not make reference to the Bamako 2006 FD. See: <http://feministdialogue.isiswomen.org>.

criteria for selection and then women participants (no men) formed small groups (French speaking, Bambara speaking, and English speaking) to discuss the difficulties that they faced in getting funding. The dialogue was not easy and there were important differences between so called “grassroots African women’s organizations”, especially between francophone and Anglophone participants, as well as with the donors. Such an event was, however, an illustration of the dialogue that an afrocentric WSF could enhance, contributing to bringing individuals and organizations from the North and the South so that they can discuss together.

The Women’s World was a very dynamic space, where discussions were numerous and African women finally had voice. But despite this enthusiasm, many participants expressed their disappointment at the end of the forum. Indeed, it had been a site of debate only, without any proposals formulated at the end. A Wall for Proposals, similar to the one used in Porto Alegre 2005, was available, but no explanations were given regarding its purpose. At the end of the WSF, only two or three proposals were included from the Women’s World. Additionally, the dynamism of the Women’s World, as shown in Table 2, can actually be counterproductive. Tens of workshops were organized on different issues by small organizations, without any coordination. The high number of activities in the platform did not necessarily enhance the women’s movement. On the contrary it tended to fragment it. Such a criticism had already been made regarding the women’s movements in the Mumbai 2004 WSF (Duddy 2004). The Feminist Dialogues were a key event in the WSF 2006, with major women’s organizations participating. Yet, organized on the first day, it had not been replicated in the end to counterbalance the diversity and fragmentation of the Women’s World. No final session, where all participants could meet and offer proposals, had been organized. The Women’s World took the form of “talk shops” rather than of “think tanks” (Alexander and Mbali 2004). What could be the outcome of such scattered small discussions? How can they better feed the learning processes of the women’s movements? What could be capitalized on and transmitted for the Nairobi Social Forum? Who will remember the discussions apart from the women actually present in Bamako?²⁹ If the Bamako WSF and the Women’s World were a way to give voice to African women activists, the lack of final proposals or capitalization made it an “atonic” voice.

Another feature of the Women’s World was that in all of its activities, whether large or more intimate, men were generally absent. Although some women participants praised the initiative as a helpful strategy for them to gather and discuss, this absence also cautions against the creation of a specific venue for gender issues, which ends up being a women-only area, as the title “the Women’s World” might indeed suggest.

Ghetto or sign of recognition?

The Women’s World can be viewed as a transnational machinery for women revealing a Women in Development (WID) rather than Gender and Development (GAD) strategy for gender mainstreaming within the WSF. It resembles the politics of “female incorporation and subsequent segregation” (Chazan 1989: 190), when women are

²⁹ Those questions are not specific to the Women’s World. They are also raised regarding the WSF process in itself, as part of the unbroken debate on the WSF as a “space” or a “movement”. See for instance: Chico Withaker, “The WSF as an open space” in Sen, J. and Anand, A. (eds.), *The WSF. Challenging Empires*, India: Viveka Foundation, 2003.

eventually drawn into the political system but in separate institutions where they cannot exert pressure. The WSF therefore depicts a political situation familiar to women from all over the world characterized by “inadequate female representation, sporadic participation and blocked channels of access to leadership circles” (Chazan 1989: 189).

Historically, gender inequality and appropriate strategies to address it were specifically discussed and conceptualized during the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985). The two first international conferences organized in this period (Mexico City 1975 and Copenhagen 1980) created a consensus in the international community recognizing the economic role of women within the development process. Prior to then, women had been seen as passive beneficiaries of development. On the contrary, the WID approach, developed in those meetings, highlighted the fact that women needed to be integrated into development processes as active agents if efficient and effective development was to be achieved. WID understood women as the “missing link” for development. But in the 1980s criticisms emerged, framed by feminists and activists from the South. They managed to get their voices heard at the Third World Conference on Women held in Nairobi in 1985, where they challenged the WID focus on women in isolation. In contrast, they proposed a new approach, Gender and Development (GAD) that focuses on imbalances of power between women and men, addressing the relational nature of women’s subordination. Women are no longer considered as a specific category. But the real change of paradigm occurred during the Beijing Conference, ten years later, which institutionalized gender equality as a priority. This marked a significant turning point for the notion of gender mainstreaming, which, though still vague, was introduced, discussed, and strategized.

Both WID and GAD approaches pinpoint women’s marginalization in the development process, but they offer different explanations of its sources and propose different strategies to address the gap (Razari and Miller 1995). Following the WID perspective, in the 1970s and 1980s, national machineries for women (NMWs)³⁰ were introduced as a key strategy for women’s integration. Although they may have had positive achievements, especially in raising gender awareness, national women’s machineries have often favoured a ghettoization of women’s issues in social or welfare departments, which has the effect of limiting their impact and significance. Women-specific structures are not sufficient to address women’s marginalization. An integration strategy is not the same as an institutionalisation strategy. The second strategy requires bringing a gender aware perspective to all aspects of the institution’s policy and activities (Oxaal 1997).

Therefore, the Women’s World can be viewed as the result of a strategy of integration rather than institutionalisation of gender, following a WID approach. On the one hand, the creation of a Women’s World reveals that gender marginalization is eventually addressed, whereas in the previous African forums, it had been neglected. The new initiative marks a form of recognition of gender unequal representation and participation into the WSF. Yet, the response is incomplete. A separate space is a form of recognition but also a perverse form of segregation. Indeed, gender issues were discussed

³⁰ NMWs are defined as: “agencies with a mandate for the advancement of women established within and by governments for integrating gender concerns in development policy and planning” (Reeves and Balden 2000: 3).

in the Bamako WSF, probably more than before. Yet most of the debates took place in the Palace of Culture, where only a few men dared to participate.

Nevertheless, such an integration strategy could be the first step towards gender mainstreaming, as it could help to provide the diagnosis which would make gender imbalance visible and thus turn gender equality into an appropriate and legitimate issue. Still, the conditions for such a process to be initiated were inadequately present in Bamako. Instead, through the Women's World, women were seen but not heard; and gender was silenced.

The Women's World was an exclusive space for women. Its very naming did not encourage men to participate in it and most women participants were actually present *only* in this venue and did not visit any other thematic areas.

Therefore, this venue was not only unable to challenge, but was even built upon, misconceptions of "gender", portrayed as "women's affairs". Such misconceptions made organizers (including women) of the WSF assume that engendering the WSF *also* meant focusing *specifically* on women. Therefore, the Women's World was a response to demands for gender institutionalisation, but interpreted through a distorted or at least incomplete conception of gender. Such a venue could not address the first challenge of the engendering of the WSF, i.e. framing gender equality and gender mainstreaming as an integral (and not a specific) part of the building of alternatives to the neoliberal globalization process.

But, as Joanna Kerr puts it, gender marginalization in the WSF is both a consequence of the gender blindness of other social movements and the result of inner weaknesses of the women's and gender advocates movement (Kerr 2003). The women's movement is still fragmented. Its visions and demands are not necessarily shared, as illustrated in the debates of the Feminist Dialogues in Bamako. Yet, the fact that such discussions were only developed in the FD, on one day, and that no other meeting was organized at the end of the week, tended to turn the Women's World into an empty space. The Women's World was a unique opportunity for women's movements, feminists, and gender advocates to meet, coordinate across boundaries, and discuss for several days. But, the Women's World failed to complete its strategic task. Despite its colourful and massive participation, the Women's World was nothing else but a collection of scattered initiatives, from which nothing could be capitalized on for the women's movements. Gender mainstreaming is a process which needs not only to be initiated, prioritized, recognized, etc, but also strategized. Only under these conditions could the women's movements benefit from its participation in the WSF.

Conclusion

What are the lessons that could be learnt from the Bamako WSF regarding gender institutionalisation? African women's participation strengthened the transnational building of the women's movements, even though their integration also challenged the necessary dialogue within the movements. In the future, discussion about the diversity of the women's movements should be prioritized in the agenda within the WSF. Secondly, despite its innovation, the Women's World has not engendered the WSF. In Nairobi WSF 2007, such a specific venue would be useful only if the women's movements use it as a strategic space to formulate and coordinate gender mainstreaming. Such a space may be necessary but it does not mean that it has to be institutionalised throughout the WSF, as

was the case with the Women's World. Why not organizing, for instance, an informal gender strategic space (modelled on the FD, but extended to gender issues at large), both at the beginning *and* at the end of the WSF, involving also men, and leaving time and energy for women's movements activists to invest all of the thematic areas with a gender lens?

Another world is not only possible, it is on her way. If I listen carefully, on quiet day, I can hear her breathe... (Arundhati Roy, "Challenging Empires" speech at the Porto Alegre WSF 2003, January 28th 2003).

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